



ART HISTORY FACTSHEET

The Chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal in San Miniato

When James of Lusitania, Cardinal of Sant'Eustachio, set out from Rome bound for Mantua to attend a council summoned to contain the Ottoman advance, little did he know it was to be his last journey. He developed symptoms of a sickness in Siena and died in Florence on 27 August 1459, barely having time to dictate his last will and testament before being buried in the Basilica of San Miniato. His tutor, Archbishop Alvaro of Silves, jotted down his will and personally took care of gathering the funds needed to build the chapel and identify the artists from whom to commission the work. His remarkable effort earned him a mention on the arch leading into the chapel, where the marble frieze bears an inscription recording the transfer of the body and the year 1466 [12 September], the date of the chapel's consecration.

Though the architectural design of the chapel has long been attributed to Antonio Manetti, it has now been possible to reconsider this attribution – the Ospedale degli Innocenti archive has been tremendously useful in this connection – in view of the short time that elapsed between the Arte dei Mercantanti (or Calimala), the guild that held patronage over the church, issuing a licence to proceed with the project submitted, 21 June 1460, and the architect's death in December of that year. It is thus highly likely that while Manetti devised the original design, it was completed by Giovanni, son of the stonecutter Matteo Gamberelli and the brother of Antonio Rossellino with whom a contract was signed in June 1460 for the sculptural decoration of the entire chapel.

The result is a relatively small space, with four arches whose intradoses are rhythmically adorned with 69 *pietra serena* stone roses set on a ground painted by Chimenti di Lorenzo in imitation of precious stones and decorated with gold leaf. Sculpted and painted decoration covers the four walls, achieving a harmonious seamlessness with the architecture, starting with the inlaid floor extending to the base of the tomb made by Roman craftsman Stefano di Bartolomeo (who is likely also to have been responsible for the altar) using a medley of serpentine marble, porphyry and granite to recreate the Cosmatesque geometrical tradition in Florence with four symmetrical axes forming a square with a central roundel surrounded by four other roundels. The vaulted ceiling, its weight lightened by brick shards set in the space between it and the roof, is adorned with a geometrical decoration in glazed terracotta imitating mosaic in shades of yellow, green and purple alluding to the Aragonese heraldic colours, with a central tondo with the Holy Spirit and his seven gifts alluded to by seven candelabra, around which sit, in relief and again in tondos, the four cardinal virtues: Temperance, Prudence, Justice holding a sword and globe, and Fortitude with her shield on which the late Cardinal's arms are crossed with those of the House of Aragon. These glittering colours had faded over the centuries, also on account of past restorers' use of purpurin which has now been removed with a laser. Attributed somewhat vaguely to Andrea della Robbia in the past, we are now certain that this is one of the finest examples of the work of Luca della Robbia with the assistance of Agostino and Ottaviano di Antonio di Duccio, for it was he who signed a contract for 150 florins with Archbishop Alvaro on 14 April 1461.

Commissioned by Archbishop Alvaro from Antonio Rossellino on 1 December 1461 with the proviso that the work be completed by Christmas of the following year, the *Tomb of the Cardinal of Portugal* follows the formula developed by Bernardo Rossellino for Leonardo Bruni's tomb in Santa Croce, albeit softened here by the insertion of independent decorative elements defining the form and space of the chapel's right-hand wall. A large marble curtain ushers our gaze into the niche on which the tomb rests on a rich base covered by finely embroidered drapery, traces of whose original painting and gilding were discovered during restoration. On top of the tomb we see the young Cardinal portrayed with his real features – his face was carved from a death mask made by Desiderio da Settignano – attired in a sumptuous chasuble. His mourners are grieving putti inspired by traditional Classical sculpture; nor are they alone in this, because the unicorn and the winged genie on the base also allude to the dead man's victory over his passions and his soul's elevation, in accordance with Classical models that appear to take their inspiration from cameos in the Medici collection. The angels in flight, carved in the round in the central register foreshadowing their counterpart in Leonardo's *Annunciation*, frame the door leading the Cardinal into eternal life, while the final register contains two angels in relief holding up a wreath in which the Virgin keeps watch over his eternal rest and the Christ Child blesses his soul as it prepares to rejoin the Lord. Antonio's soft and vibrant handling of carved surfaces which Vasari so admired is lacking in the angel holding the crown and the angel holding the wreath on the left, whose solid, robust forms suggest beyond all reasonable doubt that they should be attributed to the hand of Bernardo Rossellino, who died while the project was still ongoing in 1464.

After completing the right-hand wall with a final payment of 421 Florins in February 1466, Antonio Rossellino devoted the following months to the opposite wall where, in a similar niche mirroring the one on the other wall, he placed an episcopal throne with inscriptions on either side. The left-hand inscription discusses the indulgences granted by Pope Paul II, while the right-hand one refers to the arms of members of the Cardinal's family frescoed in sequence, in accordance with their degree of kinship with him, around the base of the chapel vault by Alesso Baldovinetti and his assistant Piero di Lorenzo. Baldovinetti received the commission for the chapel's painted decoration, including the panel portraying the *Annunciation* in a setting decorated only with the imitation marble panelling in the background (which was originally embellished with considerable red lacquer gilding) ideally continued in the vertical in the lower register with the marble throne through the vase with lilies separating the Angel from the Virgin Annunciate, and in the upper register with a glimpse of the Tuscan countryside introduced by the cypresses that surround the oculus beyond which that countryside becomes real. Alesso Baldovinetti was an unusually sensitive painter, the last heir of the "painting in light" which he had learnt in the church of Sant'Egidio (inside the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova) where he completed the now lost cycle of *Stories from the Life of the Virgin* by Domenico Veneziano and Piero della Francesca, and which it may be easier to appreciate in the panel on the same theme that he painted for the church of San Giorgio alla Costa and that is now in the Uffizi. He was not only a "painter in light", however; he was also the last heir of the mosaic tradition, a technique in its death throes by the second half of the 15th century, and it was in this capacity that he began in 1483 to restore the large *Christ Pantocrator* in the apse of the basilica, being tasked with its conservation for the rest of his life.

We can detect this training most clearly in the figures of the Evangelists accompanied by the Doctors of the Church frescoed around the arches and the Prophets facing biblical Patriarchs on the chapel's lunettes, formerly attributed to Piero and Antonio del Pollaiuolo. Antonio's hand, at any rate, can be identified in the powerfully formed angels holding back the curtain on the front wall – although the intense colour of their drapery has been damaged by a biological attack, thankfully resolved during restoration – introducing the altarpiece. Acquired by the Gallerie Fiorentine after the suppression of 1866 and replaced by a good copy in the 1930s, the altarpiece depicts St. James the Great, the young Cardinal's personal patron, St. Eustace, patron of the church whose titular cardinal he was, and St. Vincent of Saragossa who was much venerated in the Iberian peninsula. The discovery of a payment made on 20 October 1466 prompted scholars to believe for a long time that the painting was by Piero's hand alone, but careful analysis of the saints portrayed has confirmed that the picture was

painted by two different artists: one weaker in its handling of the saints at the sides, the other more expressive and more sculptural in the figure of St. James and which we can identify as the hand of Antonio, who is also likely to be responsible for the incisive treatment of detail closely influenced by the presence in Florence of Flemish artists of the calibre of Rogier van der Weyden.

This brief summary shows how, under the direction of a single hand, it was possible over roughly a decade to harmonise different styles and materials to create individual works which shine by their own light yet which, as a group, have produced a chapel broadly acknowledged to be one of the loftiest examples of Florentine Renaissance art and now restored to the community thanks to the generosity of the Cherubini family and to the unflagging commitment to the conservation of Florence's heritage shown by the Friends of Florence Foundation which has promoted this exemplary restoration, My personal gratitude must also go to the substantial team of restorers and their assistants with whom it has been a pleasure to work thanks to their temperament and to their professionalism: Daniele Angellotto, Bartolomeo Ciccone, Alessandro Gianni, Anna Medori, Nicola Savioli, Filippo Tattini and Andrea Vigna, and a host of skilled professionals whom it would take too long to list on this occasion but without whose contribution we would never have achieved this outstanding result. And lastly, I would like to express my sincere thanks to my colleague Alberto Felici, an experienced restorer thanks to whom we were able to experiment with applying the laser method to polychrome terracotta with superb results. And indeed in that connection we owe a debt of gratitude to the El.En group's *Light for Art* which provided us with the necessary instrumentation completely free of charge and to Alessandro Zanini for his assistance during the operation.

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